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VATICAN 00000007 001.3 OF 002

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Pope Benedict XVI reinforced once again his denunciation of terrorism and linked the ideal of truth to peace, freedom, justice, reconciliation and other vital aspects of a just society in his annual audience with diplomats accredited to the Holy See January 9. The pope offered notable sound bites in several areas reflecting concordance with U.S. priorities, including terrorism, freedom of religion, and human trafficking. Rumors are flying in Rome about an imminent consistory to name new cardinals, and observers continue to await the expected departure of Cardinal Secretary of State Sodano and a shake-up of the Roman Curia. Along with the pope, however, Sodano held court as usual on one of the biggest days of the year for the Vatican diplomatic corps. End Summary.

Pope Accents Truth

¶2. (SBU) Pope Benedict XVI continued the theme of "truth" he accented in messages for World Peace Day and other recent events (reftels) in his annual address to diplomats accredited to the Holy See. Complete text was sent to EUR/WE. The pope linked the ideal of truth to peace, freedom, justice, reconciliation and other vital aspects of a just society. He said it was the "common mission" of society to pursue these values. As always occurs after a papal address, observers combed the text for ammunition to buttress their positions on various issues. The pope offered notable sound bites in several areas reflecting concordance with U.S. priorities, including terrorism, freedom of religion, and human trafficking.

Terrorism

¶3. (U) Benedict continued his strong words against terrorism insisting that no circumstances could ever justify these violent acts. He said terrorism targeted the innocent and defenseless "sowing panic among whole populations." He found particularly odious the attempt by terrorists to "hide behind religion." According to Benedict, this was an attempt to make God's truth "fit one's own moral perversion." The pope cited the danger of a clash of civilizations in today's "global context."

Starvation, Trafficking

¶4. (SBU) The pope called attention to the plight of the world's poor and hungry, and said that "less than half of the immense sums spent worldwide on armaments would be more than sufficient to liberate the immense masses of the poor from destitution." He spoke of the "distressing images" of refugees and displaced persons, and said the world could not "overlook the scourge of human trafficking, which remains a disgrace in our time." [Note: In a statement released to the media later in the week, the Ambassador invoked the Pope Benedict's condemnation of human trafficking while calling attention to the President's signing of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act January 10.]

Freedom of Religion for All

¶5. (SBU) The pope highlighted freedom of religion as deserving "pride of place" among the many important freedoms at risk in today's world. Benedict cited the Universal Declaration of Human Rights while making his points. He did not single out any countries by name in noting that some states "seriously violated" the principles of religious freedom, but his reference to societies with "centuries-old cultural traditions" could well have been pointed at China and Saudi Arabia. He noted that while the Holy See called for "true freedom for the Catholic Church everywhere," it also called religious freedom "for everyone."

Israel

¶6. (SBU) The pope proclaimed that Israel "must be able to live in peace in accordance with international law" while the "Palestinian people" deserved the chance "to develop serenely"

VATICAN 00000007 002.3 OF 002

their own "democratic institutions for a free and prosperous future." Some supporters of Israel applauded the straightforward point, but Israeli Ambassador Oded Ben-Hur complained to the media that the pope had not specifically condemned recent Iranian pronouncements against Israel, and its nuclear aspirations. He later softened his comments. [Note: The Holy See has maintained diplomatic relations with Iran for over 50 years.]

Hot Spots

¶7. (U) In calling attention to several troubled regions of the world, Benedict presented reconciliation and forgiveness as a way to overcome violence and discord. He mentioned "the whole Middle East" and Africa, and pointed to Lebanon, the Great Lakes region of Africa, and Darfur by name. He noted that Iraq "has suffered daily from violent acts of terrorism." The pope gave a special vote of encouragement to the UN's recently-established peacebuilding commission, expressing his hope that it would "respond effectively [to the need for peace]...with the willing cooperation of all concerned."

Changes on the Horizon?

¶8. (SBU) The papal remarks, delivered in French from the elegant Sala Regia adjoining the Sistine Chapel, were broadcast live on Italian television and received substantial play on the media. Several media outlets highlighted the Ambassador's comments following the address, in which he emphasized Pope Benedict's message on terrorism, and the "common mission" shared by the U.S. and the Holy See to promote human dignity. The

audience for the diplomatic event, commonly regarded as the annual papal "state of the world" address, consisted of most ambassadors from the 174 countries enjoying diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Most of these representatives attended a dinner the same evening in honor of the Cardinal Secretary of State (PM equivalent), Angelo Sodano. Though Sodano is commonly acknowledged to be on his way out of the Secretariat of State, he gave no indication of it Monday, holding court with the ambassadors as usual.

19. (SBU) In addition to rumors of a Curial shake-up, there has been continued speculation about the pope's calling for a consistory to create new cardinals in the near future - perhaps in late February. There are now 111 cardinals of voting age, and Vatican regulations allow for as many as 120. The last consistory was in October 2003. Among American hopefuls, former Archbishop of San Francisco William Levada (now occupying Benedict's old seat as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) would be the only lock for a red hat.
ROONEY